

# Lessons on Leadership: thoughts for junior leaders

By MAJ Luis M. Rivera, FA

**A**s I complete another assignment and almost 14 years in the Army, I feel it is time to rethink my outlook on leadership. As a lieutenant, I knew I had to be as technically and tactically proficient as possible. Now, as I get further into my career, I am relying more on others to be the technical and tactical experts, while I concentrate more of my time on leadership. I hope the following principles and lessons help our junior leaders mold their leadership styles.

**P**riorities — set and live them. Earlier in my career, my priorities were not well defined, and my focus was not on my family. Now, after 14 years of service, I understand why we have priorities. My number one priority is my spirituality. It has not always been my number one priority, and, when it wasn't, my life was a mess. My second priority has changed throughout the years, but thanks to a good friend, I put number two into better perspective.

My number two, most of the time, is my family, but can and has been other things as well. It could be my country, career, hobbies, etc. Your secondary priority will depend on your current situation. My number two is country when I am deployed. When I'm not deployed, my number two is my

family. That doesn't mean I love my family any less when deployed. One thing I have learned is to take care of my family now and consistently because when the Army goes away, I want my family to still be there.

Focus and don't have too many priorities because like I heard LTG Rick Lynch say, "If you focus on everything, you can't fix anything." Whenever I'm in doubt of what my number two should be, I just refer back to number one. Once you establish your priorities, get feedback from a respected mentor, share them with your family and then set out to live and protect them.

**S**AD—standards, accountability and discipline. When I was a battalion S3, my command sergeant major, CSM James Benedict, taught me the Army has a standard for everything it does. Beyond that, it also has those standards written down somewhere in a technical manual, Army regulation, standing operating procedures or a policy letter.

The problem comes when Soldiers, mainly officers, don't read those documents, don't know and understand the standards and then violate them. The usual excuse I've heard when a standard is violated is, "Well, the regulation doesn't say we couldn't do it!" They are correct; do you know why? Regulations are not written to tell you what not to do. They are written to inform you of

what to do, and anything other than that is wrong. You may not agree with it, but unless you are in a position to change it, suck it up and follow the set standards. If you want to make recommendations, make them; but until the standard is changed, follow it.

Standards that are upheld and Soldiers who are held accountable contribute to good order and discipline in a unit. There must be accountability for everything we do. When there is no accountability, there's often chaos, strife and a bad command climate. Even small infractions must be dealt with immediately. If all Soldiers in a unit know and follow the standards and leaders hold everyone accountable for their actions, the result will be a well-disciplined unit with a great command climate, good order and discipline.

**K**now your Soldiers and their families. As a captain, I worked for a lieutenant colonel who was adamant about asking me how my family was doing and asked about them by their names. Every time, it really impressed me that he took the time to remember my family members' names and cared enough to ask about them. He wasn't just faking it to "check the block." He was truly genuine in his references, and most of our conversations lasted longer than five minutes.

Leaders must make an honest, solid effort to know their Soldiers and families.



You don't have to know their names, but I will tell you it is a combat multiplier when you ask your immediate subordinates about their spouse and kids each week. Think of how you feel when a leader asks you about your family. Better yet, how do you feel when a leader never asks about your family? How are you supposed to lead your subordinates if you don't know about their families, how they are personally, and more importantly, how to pick up on when they are having problems?

Do not fake being concerned for your Soldiers; they will see right through you. On the other hand, genuine concern will instill trust and confidence from your subordinates — a sense of teamwork and camaraderie only explained by experience and not words.

**C**oach, counsel and mentor. I feel the Army pays a lot of lip service to

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this topic, and it is not enforced properly. In my opinion, a leader's sole purpose is to put himself out of the job by coaching his subordinates to do his job. This endeavor takes time and dedication, and it must be done deliberately. Reflect on what *Field Manual 6-22 Army Leadership* states about the competency on developing other leaders. "Leaders encourage and support others to grow as individuals and teams. They facilitate the achievement of organizational goals through assisting others to develop. They prepare others to assume new positions elsewhere in the organization, making the organization more versatile and productive."

Coaching is synonymous with teaching; they both deal with instructing others. Coaching takes one-on-one dedication and time. Before taking command of my first battery, my battalion commander took me aside on different occasions to impart words of wisdom, lessons learned and his leadership philosophy. During a deployment before taking command, he allowed me to "right-seat-ride" with the unit I was going to command to see them in action. As the final piece of his coaching, we sat down and with his help, I wrote my command philosophy. That experience encouraged me to do the

same with my lieutenants before they move on to lead a platoon and before departing for the Captain's Career Course.

Army Regulation 623-3 requires initial counseling to occur within the first 30 days of an officer's or NCO's arrival to his new unit. It further requires quarterly follow-up counseling for all NCOs and officers in the ranks of lieutenant, captain and warrant officer one and two. My experience tells me this does not happen very often, if at all. A leader must take the responsibility initially to articulate to his subordinates what is expected of them, how they have performed and, more importantly, give them focus for the future. Counseling is crucial to growing leaders and organizations.

After a subordinate departs from the direct influence of a leader, the endeavor can change to mentoring, which is done indirectly because there is no direct daily contact. Mentoring must be wanted, and the leader must want to give it. Too many times, I see junior leaders come into a unit, and their senior

leaders expect them to go straight into a job they have never done and excel without any guidance, coaching or mentoring. Prime your subordinates for their next duty and set them up for success.

Have you been coached, counseled or mentored? Do you currently have a mentor whom you can contact, ask for advice and speak with regarding professional matters? Is there a subordinate who is looking for that in you? Do your part to improve the Army. Find ways to coach, counsel and mentor the future leaders of our Army.

**T**he "doer" does what the "checker" checks. This is another one taken from the "CSM Benedict kit bag." How much effort will a Soldier put into a task if he knows you will not check his progress? After a while, the Soldier may even think you don't care if you don't check on him. Some may see this as micromanagement, but it is what leaders do. Supervising is one of the troop-leading procedures, and it can't be ignored. Let me be very clear that supervision is not micromanagement.

The other benefit of this axiom is if a Soldier knows you will check on him, his pride and discipline will not allow him to fail. By checking on your subordinates, you also can gauge if your orders are being followed,

which is key to mission accomplishment. An organization's success and failures can be gauged easily by how proactive leaders check on their subordinates.

**T**hermostat or thermometer? This was also taken from another command sergeant major kit bag — this time from CSM Marvin L. Hill. Think about the difference between a thermostat and a thermometer. How can a Soldier be either, and which one is most important to be? If someone is a thermometer, they can tell the temperature of an organization and maybe even tell you what is causing the temperature to rise or fall, but that's all. The thermometer cannot change or influence the unit's temperature.

It takes someone special to be a thermostat. First, a thermostat must know the temperature of a unit just like the thermometer. Once the temperature is established, the thermostat can influence the temperature. The thermostat can change the temperature using attitude, character and influence. If the unit is cold, the thermostat can turn up the heat. If the temperature is hot, the thermostat can cool things down. The thermostat always knows the "pulse" of the unit and can influence it accordingly. The key is the thermostat possesses integrity, a positive attitude, strong character, and is a positive influence.

**P**redictability. If there is something Soldiers want more than money and time off, it is predictability. Leaders must provide predictability now more than ever with the War on Terrorism's deployments. This must be established and enforced from the division commander down to the squad leader.

In the 3rd Infantry Division, we provided predictability by ensuring Soldiers received a copy of the next week's training schedule every Thursday. They could take it home and share with their families. The training day ended on Thursdays at 3 p.m. During battery command time, our commander's policy was no training past 5 p.m. unless approved 48 hours prior. This policy allowed a Soldier to tell his family beforehand when he was scheduled to work late. This was the exception, not the norm.

Other ways that leaders can ensure predictability is having effective battalion- and company-level training meetings. These meetings cover as far out as 12 weeks and allow for the timely acquisition of resources. Once a training schedule is approved, it is not changed. The battalion commander was the approval authority for any changes



PFC Ryan Saunders, targeting specialist, SSG Joshua Salem, brigade targeting NCO, and MAJ Jason Yanda, brigade fire support officer, all with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, oversee the brigade's live-fire training exercise at Fort Bragg, N.C., June 9 to 11. (Photo by SPC Michael J. MacLeod, U.S. Army)

made to an approved and published training schedule. The bottom line is leaders had to make a conscious effort not to change training once it was published. This put more strain and emphasis on the planning cycle, ensuring a Soldier's time was not wasted and established predictability.

**L**et your actions and speech be filled with grace. It amazes me how many leaders and Soldiers in today's Army think every sentence they speak has to have a curse word in it. As a lieutenant going through Ranger School, I remember when the brigade commander gave us his introduction speech. He said that if a leader has to curse, he is not educated enough to lead his Soldiers.

Your speech and actions will say a lot about you and how you treat others. It will influence how others respond to you and how they will perform for you. Some leaders think if you don't get loud and mad when someone fails in a tasking that you are soft and won't be able to influence your Soldiers in the future. *Field Manual 6-22 Army Leadership* Appendix A states that a leader can create a positive environment by showing "others how to accomplish tasks while remaining respectful, resolute and focused." If you lose control and everyone is fearful to talk to you, how effective do you think you will be in leading them? Will they accomplish the tasks assigned to them? Yes, if they are disciplined Soldiers, but you won't earn their respect.

Wisdom and knowledge come from experience and learning to listen to others before you respond. If you are always screaming, losing control and cursing at your Soldiers, you won't have room to learn from them and hear what they have to say. The climate in your unit will not

be productive. Check yourself next time someone tells you something contradictory to what you wanted to hear and see if you react with malice or with grace. Remember your words can be weapons of destruction or tools of construction.

**C**haracter and attitude drive influence. How do you react when your boss rants and raves, responding in a negative way to everything you say? Now, reverse that. What is the atmosphere in a unit where the attitude of its leaders is open, positive and nurturing? You choose how your attitude will be each day and how you react to outside influences. If you are a leader, your attitude will affect your subordinates around you and also will affect the performance level of your unit and or staff.

COL (Retired) Colin Willis once told me my unit would take on my attitude within the first 90 days of assuming command. Good or bad, my attitude would be their attitude. So, I had to choose wisely what my attitude would be each day.

Your character is tied directly to your integrity, and your integrity must be impeccable. Leaders have no room for violations of character or integrity in any way. When I think of character, I think of the words spoken by GEN George C. Marshall in 1941. He said, "When you are commanding, leading [Soldiers] under conditions where physical exhaustion and privation must be ignored; where the lives of [Soldiers] may be sacrificed, then, the efficiency of your leadership will depend only to a minor degree on your tactical or technical ability. It will primarily be determined by your character."

Your character and attitude will drive the amount and type of influence you have

on your subordinates. If you choose to have a poor character and attitude toward your Soldiers, your influence over them will be minimal to none. Choose wisely what path you take. Be a leader of impeccable character, positive attitude, and your influence will be a combat multiplier.

**L**ook for the gold, not the dirt. I first heard this saying reading the book *Maxwell 3-in-1 Special Edition (The Winning Attitude/Developing the Leaders Around You/Becoming a Person of Influence)* by John Maxwell. Too many times leaders look for what Soldiers do wrong instead of what they do right. Positive things do happen regardless of the situation. It takes a true leader to see every situation in a positive way. Looking for the gold can bring out lessons learned in the worst of circumstances, and the unit can improve from those discoveries.

Leaders who are negative and hold grudges don't have the maturity to see past shortcomings and motivate their Soldiers to improve. COL (Retired) Mark Blum asked me, "What are you going to do with the hand that you are dealt." At the time, he was referring to how we, as commanders, were going to train our units even though we were at 50 percent strength. In that type of situation, you have to look for the gold to get something positive out of very little.

As I look back at my years of service, I am very fortunate to have had great NCOs who took the time to teach me about leadership because they wanted their officer to succeed. Whether it was my Dad, platoon sergeant, first sergeant or command sergeant major, the backbone of the Army has been a great influence in my career. I challenge you — whatever stage of your career you are in — take time to put pen to paper and write down the principles you feel mold your outlook on leadership. Once you do, be true to your words and share them with the future leaders of our country. ■

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